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Eldridge II, Scott

Published in:
The Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies

DOI:
[10.1386/ajms.7.3.541_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms.7.3.541_1)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Eldridge II, S. (2018). Repairing a fractured field: Dynamics of collaboration, normalization and appropriation at intersections of newswork. *The Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 7(3), 541-559. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms.7.3.541_1

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Repairing a fractured field: Dynamics of collaboration, normalization and appropriation at intersections of newswork

Scott A. Eldridge II, University of Groningen

Abstract

New patterns of journalistic endeavour have altered the ways in which news and information reach the public, with new technologies enabling new types of journalistic actors to produce news both on their own and in collaborative arrangements with traditional journalists. From these intersections, new questions for understanding journalism amid change ask whether we are facing a fractured or more consolidated journalistic field. This article explores intersections of traditional and emergent news actors as disruptions to the dominant vision of the field. It shows the treatment of autonomous work of digital interlopers in news texts as reinforcing prevailing views of journalism by invoking traditional information authority and paradigmatic news-source relationships. Using field theory and analysis of narratives of journalistic roles in news texts to support its thesis, this article looks at reactions to the emergence of two independent news actors – WikiLeaks and ProPublica – representing distinct approaches to newswork born of a digital age. In its conclusion, this article outlines the initial framework for an ‘appropriation thesis’ that extends paradigm repair in instances when new journalistic actors’ newswork is subsumed under traditional routines, thereby muting narratives of a heterogeneous field that would contradict the field’s dominant vision and authority.

Keywords

boundary work

paradigm repair

field theory

appropriation

normalization

interloper media

Introduction

Writing in 2011 and again in 2013, Yochai Benkler argues that journalism practice is increasingly intersecting with ‘new forces of journalistic production’ (2013: 11), moving the journalistic field towards a ‘Networked Fourth Estate’. Exploring cases where traditional and non-traditional journalistic actors have come together to report prominent news stories, Benkler’s work has been widely embraced for its positive evaluation of WikiLeaks’ journalistic contributions and collaborative newswork. He argues that emerging journalistic actors are contributing to journalistic enterprise in ways that shift the power dynamics of journalism away from the perceived-centrality of a traditional field, and for that contribution they warrant consideration of their journalistic roles (Benkler 2011: 315). This shift, Benkler goes on, exposes news media as vulnerable to claims of journalistic authority made by networked actors, although in their responses they demonstrate resiliency to change. We see demonstrations of vulnerability when the traditional field treats emerging actors as threats (Eldridge 2013), and resiliency when they find ways to incorporate new forms of mediation into their journalistic repertoires of practice (Singer 2005; Lasorsa, et al. 2012).

This article uses the prism of field theory to first conceptualize dynamics of intersection between traditional and new journalistic actors to, second, understand the treatment of

new actors with respect to newswork performed at moments of intersection. Focusing on Benkler's prediction of greater interaction and collaboration between traditional and digital actors, it expands on previous work categorizing new actors as journalistic 'interlopers' (Eldridge 2014) to develop a complementary thesis that looks at prevailing notions of journalistic primacy and sometimes-narrow interpretations of journalistic belonging. It asks whether these intersections produce a more networked field or a more fractious one with contestations of authority and journalistic primacy in play. It explores the emergence of news actors from outside the traditional field, such as WikiLeaks, and crossover work with non-profit news organizations, such as ProPublica, the Marshall Fund, the Bureau for Investigative Journalism and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

Recognizing that we have yet to arrive at a networked Fourth Estate, this study asks whether despite appearances of intersection, traditional priorities still dominate, thereby repairing any cracks in the boundaries that have defined the field. Of particular interest are the ways in which public-facing discourses of newswork and journalistic identity respond to new forms of journalistic enterprise, embracing a critical approach to understanding public-facing expressions of journalistic identity at moments of interaction.

Situating the field

As an organizing lens for understanding groups of actors in society, field theory can structure gauzy notions of what distinguishes societal actors – including journalists – from one another. Bourdieu (2005) counts the journalistic field among several fields of cultural production, where journalists' ability to elevate information from a source to

exist as ‘news’ – a cultural product – distinguishes theirs from other fields (Bourdieu 2005; Benson 2006). This production rests on a perceived information authority that also places the journalistic field among fields of power, not only communicating information but also presenting a ‘dominant vision’ of society (Bourdieu 2005: 44). Alongside this outward-facing communication from the journalistic field towards society, a simultaneous communication process iterates a dominant vision of what it is to belong to the field. This invokes a shared perception among journalists that their work is integral to the functioning of society and they are uniquely able to identify and share news (Eldridge 2014: 3).

Journalists’ ability to project this dominant vision is in part enabled by the routine selection, evaluation and amplification of information for public edification (Schultz 2007). Journalists claim primacy in the fulfilment of these roles, and when imbued with journalism’s normative ideals (Eldridge and Steel 2016), portray these as necessary for the day-to-day conduct of society. News routines underscore journalists’ claims of public service (Donsbach 2010: 38), and beyond separating journalists from other societal actors they inform the field’s unified claim of information authority (Benson and Neveu 2005: 4).

For understanding the field at moments of intersection, it is important to see this authority as built upon ‘agreed-upon complicities’ resulting from internal and external socialization processes; in other words, journalists see themselves as part of a unified field, reinforced by a broad societal recognition that the production of news and information authority is associated most closely with such a field. These processes contribute to journalists’ ‘permanent dispositions’ (Bourdieu 2005: 30), shape their

identity and inform the way in which journalists present their status, their contributions and their performance of newswork to the public.

Disrupting the field

Considering these dynamics, the ability of new actors to *also* select, evaluate and amplify information purportedly as news signals a potential loss of exclusive power over news legitimation and of the ability to convert cultural capital into economic capital (to make news financially valuable). When they breach lines of access between fields of power that were previously exclusive to traditional journalists, new actors threaten to ‘appropriate what is thought to secure readership’ (Bourdieu 2005: 44). This is particularly the case when new actors operate in eye-catching ways the traditional members of the field cannot, themselves becoming as much a focus of coverage as the news that they are reporting (Eldridge 2017a; Lynch 2013).

Seen as disruptions to distinction and to authority, the response to new actors has frequently been one of rejection. Hardened by confrontation, traditional field members retreat to familiar ‘predispositions’, consolidating how the field *should* be constructed and how it *should* be presented. Through a ‘long process of socialization’ (Benson and Neveu 2005: 3), journalists within the field seem to know what is expected of its members – the inherent criteria of the *doxa* (Bourdieu 2005: 36–37). While this can shore up a shared sense of journalism’s boundaries (Benkler’s notion of resilience in the face of challenge), Bourdieu argues that a reactive tendency leads to more uniformity and conservative approaches within journalism. This conservatism extends to a lack of acknowledgement that new actors are capable of newswork, exposing journalists to critique

¹ (Eldridge 2013) and leading to ‘anxiety about the changes that the fourth estate is undergoing’ (Benkler 2013: 30).

New ‘citizen’ actors have disrupted the journalistic field by working in ways that mute distinctions between sources, journalists and publics (Allan 2013; Hermida and Thurman 2008). At a post-publication point, utilitarian and individual approaches to news and information see differentiated media repertoires that tailor media use to sate specific needs, altering traditional actors’ ability to shape news agendas (Bro 2017; Hasebrink 2017). Digital communities intervene in linear models of news as well, informing audiences at both the news and the source levels. This sees information authority become the product of processes of re-negotiation, as online publics amplify, dispute and verify news making use of the affordances of digital platforms (Mortensen 2015, Shirky 2003). Social media spaces have also introduced change, with practices of (re)production, (re)mediation and (re)circulation altering patterns of cultural production and introducing new practices of information legitimation and sense-making (Bødker 2015).

Destabilizing in the first instance, these changes (and challenges) suggest that journalistic power and interpretations of social reality are far more multi-directional, and far less certain. They pose new questions over whose authority is considered valid. This notion of validity can be explored by understanding how ‘disruptive’ actors are presented in discourses of journalistic identity, leading to the first research question:

RQ1: How are ProPublica and WikiLeaks referred to in news texts with respect to their contribution as autonomous news actors?

Reacting to disruption: Normalization

Normalization, in the context of digital journalism studies, refers to the adoption of new media forms by journalists who negotiate use of these new technologies to fit within existing professional routines and norms (Lasorsa et al. 2012). It is a reaction to change when that change originates outside the traditional news media realm. When blogs emerged as competing platforms for news and news analysis, journalists and journalistic organizations sought to incorporate these media types into their work, normalizing the ‘j-blogger’ (Singer 2005). Later, as Twitter grew in prominence, we saw it normalized into journalists’ routines (Lasorsa et al. 2012; Parmelee 2013). By normalizing, journalists adapt technologies that otherwise challenge their primacy to fit within extant professional norms.

Through routine use, journalists not only communicate news in new ways, but also advance their preferred societal vision. This mutes the initial disruptions of the new form. Normalization, however, is not seamless or straightforward. Blogs, now a regular feature of traditional news output, still draw the ire of some journalists who see bloggers as somehow ‘other’,² and Twitter is viewed inconsistently; alternatively, as a service journalists use to reach their audience (Artwick 2013), an avenue to source material (Vis 2013), or as an imposition on news routines (Barnard 2016).

Nevertheless, normalization describes processes of adoption and adaptation that work in favour of the traditional actor doing the ‘normalizing’. As a process, normalization is an exertion of power; critics point to the way in which it negates new platforms’ initial, alternative, approaches (Broersma and Graham 2016). From this vantage,

normalization reflects an ability of traditional and legacy media to maintain their societal power by nullifying emergent voices. Lasorsa et al., note this when they describe the normalization process as a ‘negotiation’ between journalists and new platforms that ‘directly challenge them’ (2012: 19). This leads to the second research question:

RQ2: Are the intersections with WikiLeaks and ProPublica ‘normalized’ under the news routines of the New York Times? (And if so, how so?)

News paradigms and institutionalism

Part of the disruption posed by new actors claiming alternative approaches to journalism is their deviation from ‘preconstrained’ routines of the field (Bourdieu 2005: 45). Among those routines holding sway over the journalistic field are news-source routines, which insist that for information to be elevated to news it must first be subject to negotiation between sources and journalists, verified and validated. As a preconstraint, journalists employ such routines to evaluate whether a source’s ‘interpretations of social reality are legitimate’ (Broersma et al. 2013: 388), what Gaye Tuchman calls a ‘legitimation practice’ (1978). Wolfgang Donsbach describes: ‘probably the most important reason for the existence of journalism is a professional service whose unique selling proposition is the validation of assertions about reality with a high degree of responsibility’ (2010: 39). For the dimensions of the field, such routines are geared to meet perceived expectations of the public, demonstrating journalists’ awareness of their power for organizing public awareness (Schudson 1995: 20).

In dialogue with David Ryfe (2006), Rodney Benson (2006: 194) describes such expectations as ‘pseudo-rules’ that preserve autonomy within the field’s own structures by ‘constraining and enabling, not determining’ practice. They are constraining inasmuch as they encourage minimal variation from the organizational and professional imperatives, and enabling in the sense that they create a set of routines according to which journalists know how to operate (Benson 2006: 188). These are often seen as immutable, and shape both internal (field) and external (public) expectations of journalism so convincingly they serve to define (Ryfe 2006: 135). In the traditional/non-traditional binary assessed here, routines and practices result from journalistic institutions’ ‘macro-level forces on micro-level action’ (Ryfe 2006: 137). However, these forces are absent from the conditions of practice that new types of journalistic actor work within, whether in terms of alternative sourcing (as with WikiLeaks) or non-traditional structures (as with ProPublica), and therefore can grate against the dominant vision of the field.

Typically, when departures from paradigmatic routines occur in traditional realms they are attributed to individual or organizational dalliances, rather than contradicting a view of journalism as homogeneous. While Ryfe cautions against seeing journalism as uniform, and this study agrees that such views narrowly appreciate new forms of journalistic endeavour, visions of the field continue to emerge in reactions that support such homogeneity, and prevailing views continue to ‘stick’, even where these are uncritically advanced (Ryfe 2006: 138, 140). Previous research has shown that when confronted by contradicting narratives of what it is to be a journalist, traditional tenets are amplified, presenting journalism as a consolidated field, and new attributes – such as online acumen, or non-traditional origins – are used as disqualifying features of

journalistic belonging (Eldridge 2013, 2014, 2017b). Reactions in these cases appear defensive – understandably, as a heterogeneous field challenges the authority of dominant members and intensifies competition to promote their unique visions of society. Heterogeneity, particularly in a digital context, also challenges the ability of field members ‘to valorize those forms of capital which they possess’ (Benson 2006: 190) as both cultural production and information authority are more diffuse, as is the ability to reach a mass public.

Whether in response to new journalists’ claims of belonging or to new intersections with non-traditional actors, language in news texts offers indications of either a more ‘networked’ and therefore heterogeneous journalism, or a more consolidated understanding of journalism, hemmed in by traditional boundaries. Where traditional paradigms are employed in news texts to validate newswork of new actors, we see signs of ‘normalization’ of intersecting newswork as traditional members subsume new forms of newswork under familiar routines. Where we see parity partnered members’ newswork, we find indications of a more networked field. In either case we can better understand the ways in which new and traditional actors are intersecting at the boundaries of the field, leading to the final question guiding this research:

RQ3: How are news routines referenced with respect to the intersecting newswork of the *Times*, ProPublica and WikiLeaks?

Methodology

This study analyses references to WikiLeaks and ProPublica as autonomous, non-traditional journalistic actors that ‘intersect’ at different points with the *New York*

Times. It focuses on discrete moments when each are referenced in news coverage, with analysis at the sentence or phrase level to explore the way in which new actors are portrayed. This approaches news texts as avenues for ‘outward-facing expressions of journalistic identity’ (Eldridge 2014: 3). Analysis looks to the use of a ‘familiar’ journalistic lexica – including labels of editor, journalist, reporter, etc. – and discourses of guiding paradigms and routines – including public interest defences, the role of verification and editorial oversight, among others – as signs of belonging. In contrast, the use of an ‘unfamiliar’ lexica emphasizes outsider status or technical utility (e.g. describing a non-traditional journalistic organization as a ‘website’ rather than a news organization, or as a source rather than a journalistic actor). This draws on experience exploring such discourse types for their reflections of journalistic identity and boundaries. These lexica are not finite, and an iterative approach to identifying (un)familiar lexical markers is adopted that builds on previous studies of in-group/out-group dynamics of fields in the face of change (Conboy and Eldridge 2015; Eldridge 2013, 2014: 8). Analysis looks at journalistic metadiscourses occurring in brief moments within larger news texts (i.e. a single mention within a larger report stemming from the collaborative or intersecting activity).

For references to both WikiLeaks and ProPublica, ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ discourses will be explored, the former coming in signposted discussions of newswork, the latter describing discussions of journalism where neither journalism nor newswork is referenced in a headline (Eldridge 2014: 4). Identifying markers of information authority alongside the use of ‘familiar’ lexical markers of journalism allows this approach to explore intersections of traditional and non-traditional journalistic work.

This article looks further to explore the normalized adoption of non-traditional newswork to advance understanding of normalization as an extension of paradigm repair, or the discursive reinforcement of a traditional portrait of the journalistic field at moments when that is challenged by external factors (Berkowitz 2000). This draws on Mark Coddington's (2014) and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen's (2014) studies using the framework of paradigm repair and boundary maintenance to explore treatments of WikiLeaks. Specifically, it asks whether journalistic paradigms are asserted differently depending on the nature of the external actor referenced and how traditional primacy is maintained via narratives of journalistic paradigms. This contributes towards conceptual understandings and methodological approaches for exploring emerging news actors.

The cases

Both ProPublica and WikiLeaks associate themselves with traditional roles of journalism, and each use familiar lexical markers in their own descriptions. ProPublica describes its work as investigative journalism in the 'public interest' that 'shines a light on exploitation of the weak by the strong and on the failures of those with power' (ProPublica.org/about). WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange has long called himself a journalist and editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, a 'not-for-profit media organisation', adding: 'A healthy, vibrant and inquisitive journalistic media plays a vital role in achieving these goals. We are part of that media' (WikiLeaks.org/About, 2015).³ These organizations work autonomously, and promote intersecting newswork – ProPublica encourages you to 'Steal our Stories' and publishes online using a Creative Commons attribution, whereas WikiLeaks makes its files available online, encouraging journalists and activists alike to engage with its material, and both have worked in partnerships

with a number of outlets, including the *New York Times*, BBC, *Guardian*, Channel 4, Al Jazeera and many others.⁴

With these comparisons, similarities end. ProPublica has been at the centre of Pulitzer Prize-winning newswork, founded by financiers who hired editors and journalists with experience in traditional newspapers. WikiLeaks' best-known persona is its founder Julian Assange, who has identified his newswork as 'Scientific Journalism', juxtaposing news with digital artefacts of primary source material (Lynch 2013). His computer savvy allowed WikiLeaks to develop new avenues for whistleblowing and leaking documents online, but he has rankled the traditional outlets that he has worked with (Eldridge 2013, 2014). It should also be noted that this study focuses on a time period when WikiLeaks' work was most strongly aligned with journalism, a period when Assange's journalistic identity claims were most pronounced. This has been more in flux in years since, most notably in 2016 when its publications surrounding the U.S. presidential campaign came across as manipulating politics, rather than providing journalism.

Sample

The analysis in this study is intentionally exploratory as it seeks to develop new textures of understanding at intersections on the boundaries of the journalistic field. While an extensive amount of material is explored, analysis is geared towards the initial moments of interaction with new types of journalistic actor. The first stage of analysis looks at coverage in the *New York Times* that mentions ProPublica and the second does the same with WikiLeaks.

For ProPublica, the first 321 articles mentioning ‘ProPublica’ in the *New York Times* (from 9 March 2008 to 17 February 2016) were gathered using LexisNexis. For WikiLeaks, there were more than 1,172 results in the LexisNexis search of ‘WikiLeaks’, and the first 300 articles (from 16 November 2007 to 19 January 2011) were selected. This allows research to explore how one organization refers to two separate autonomous partners within its news coverage with a similar sample size and in the initial stages of each interaction. Previous research has found journalistic identity discourses as more-or-less solidified within the first phases of *Guardian* and *Times* coverage of WikiLeaks (Eldridge 2013, 2014), and so it is reasonable to anticipate that narratives of newswork, paradigms and boundaries will emerge in a comparable time period.

Data and analysis

Benkler’s ‘Networked fourth estate’ thesis never assumes an easy path towards regular collaboration, and this is clear in the cases explored here. We can see a projection of traditional journalistic primacy that, even in ‘familiar’ partnerships, narrates an exclusive and authoritative role of the speaking media (the *New York Times*) over the intersecting partner (ProPublica or WikiLeaks). This comes through in public displays of the process of newswork and performances of authority that reinforce dominant news-source paradigms and authority. Overall, the *New York Times* describes ProPublica using familiar lexical markers often, and WikiLeaks rarely. However, there remains a nuanced and outward-facing expression of traditional primacy and a more complex performance of a dominant vision of journalism.

ProPublica: External, but familiar

ProPublica is first mentioned in the *New York Times* on 10 December 2007, in a column by the late David Carr, titled ‘Muckraking Pays, Just Not in Profit’, describing ProPublica among a series of not-for-profit investigative endeavours as ‘an independent, nonprofit newsroom led by Paul Steiger, the former managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*’. References to Steiger’s former – traditional – journalistic role are frequent, and incorporate familiar lexical markers. As a descriptor, it validates ProPublica’s journalistic bona fides, as does the use of ‘muckraking’, channelling a familiar term for investigative journalism. Across the *Times*’ references to ProPublica, there are nine separate references to Steiger’s former role at the *Journal* using this phrasing, and similar treatments when referencing the ‘traditional’ experience of other named ProPublica journalists.

Early mentions of ProPublica focus on its characteristics. A reader letter focuses on the ‘hired gun’ approach (critiquing its model) and a long look at its financial backers asks whether ProPublica’s investigations would ever target the political left (*New York Times*, 9 March 2008). In December of 2008, there is a reference to ‘reporters at *The New York Times* and ProPublica’ (14 December 2008) that reflects an in-group association; this appears outside any collaborative reporting. The first reference to collaboration describes ‘a joint report by ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization, PBS’s “Frontline” and *The New York Times*’ (21 December 2008), followed by another story on its financiers on 25 December 2008:

More recently they founded and financed ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative journalism enterprise that has collaborated with *The New York Times* on

coverage and a news archive. Its 14-member advisory board includes two top *New York Times* Company editors.

Similar references to ProPublica's organization and its approach continue to emerge, nearly always juxtaposing its novelty alongside traditional journalistic markers, as with the following example: 'a nonprofit independent newsroom financed by The Sandler Foundation and headed by Paul Steiger, former managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*' (30 March 2009). In moments, early references to news produced by ProPublica and similar organizations use semi-familiar lexical markers, referring to ProPublica as a 'journalism organization' (*New York Times*, 27 June 2009) and its reporters as 'investigative journalists' (*New York Times*, 7 July 2009).

Notably, a 19 July 2009 Public Editor column by Clark Hoyt explains why the *New York Times* collaborates comfortably with the uniquely structured ProPublica. Hoyt points explicitly to the ProPublica's journalists' backgrounds with traditional organizations:

The paper's partnership with ProPublica developed because Keller and other *Times* editors had long experience with the organization's top editors, Paul Steiger and Stephen Engelberg. Steiger was the managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal* for 16 years, and Engelberg was once the investigative editor at *The Times*. Jill Abramson, managing editor for news at *The Times*, is on the journalism advisory board of ProPublica. (19 July 2009)

While there is a great deal of familiarity expressed linguistically, through use of terms such as ‘journalist’ and ‘muckraker’, and in terms of experience, referencing the backgrounds of ProPublica’s personnel, there are fewer signs of parity. Initially when the *Times* runs ProPublica content, byline attribution does not use the word ‘journalism’ or ‘news’, instead referring to: ‘ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative-reporting group’ (23 July 2009). In a letter from the editor to readers announcing a *Times*/ProPublica collaboration, the letter reinforces the *Times*’ primacy, highlighting its editorial control: ‘the magazine editor who eventually did most of the careful editing of the manuscript here’, adding: ‘The article has been shaped not only by ProPublica but by *Times* editors; it passed through the magazine’s normal editing process; and it was read and read again by the paper’s top management as well as that of ProPublica’ (30 August 2009). Bylines in this collaboration refer to ProPublica as an ‘independent nonprofit investigative organization’ (in contrast to ProPublica’s topline description as an ‘independent, non-profit newsroom’). Elsewhere it is described sometimes as an ‘investigative journalism group’ (4 times) and more often as an independent ‘nonprofit investigative organization’ (33 times), and frequently grouped with online-only news sites also started by former newspaper journalists, such as Politico.com (sixteen times), and other non-profit organizations, such as the Marshall Project (sixteen times).

On 11 November 2010 the *Times* begins running a regular column by Jesse Eisinger, noting that he previously worked for *Conde Nast Portfolio* and was a regular *Wall Street Journal* columnist, and byline attribution shifts. Eisinger is described as ‘a reporter for ProPublica, an independent, nonprofit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest’. From this point on, this syntax accompanies stories published in the *Times* by Eisinger and others with ProPublica.

As with the treatment of WikiLeaks discussed below, technological novelty is used to frame their newswork in ways that, at times, distances new actors from traditional journalism. With ProPublica, this emerges in positive references, such as: ‘News organizations that publish solely or primarily online, most of them nonprofits, have become an important force in American journalism’ (the *New York Times*, 17 July 2009), or in isolated descriptions of ProPublica as a website, rather than a news organization: ‘The so-called Magnetar deals were the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation by the nonprofit website ProPublica in 2010’ (the *New York Times*, 13 December 2013). There are also frequent references to visualizations or online tools on ProPublica’s website. While emphasizing its digital nature, these do not marginalize it as significantly as found in other cases explored elsewhere (see: Eldridge 2013).

WikiLeaks: An unfamiliar outsider

WikiLeaks, for all its prominence and exuberant claims of journalistic belonging (see: Eldridge 2014), is rarely treated as a member of the field. Initial treatments of WikiLeaks are far removed from journalistic descriptor, despite Assange’s description of WikiLeaks’ work as journalism. The first reference to WikiLeaks is in 2007, focusing on its technological novelty: ‘a Web site that encourages posting of leaked materials’ (16 November 2007) and pre-dating any collaborative intersection with the *Times* by two and a half years. This same description is used four times; other descriptions include ‘a muckraking site’ (5), variations of ‘whistleblower Web site’ (49) and ‘an online source of hard-to-get documents’ (*New York Times*, 5 May 2009). When Assange is working to make Iceland a journalistic safe haven (*New York Times*,

22 February 2010), his proffered title of ‘Editor’ is never used. (This gels with other studies that have shown inconsistent acknowledgement of Assange’s expressed journalistic identity.)

In 2010 WikiLeaks is described as a disruptive force that challenges societal structures affecting journalism and its boundaries. Writing of the ‘Collateral Murder’ video, featuring an army helicopter firing on civilians in Iraq that Reuters failed to secure legally (two Reuters journalists were killed in the attack), Noam Cohen and Brian Stelter write:

WikiLeaks has inserted itself in the national discussion about the role of journalism in the digital age. Where judges and plaintiffs could once stop or delay publication with a court order, WikiLeaks exists in a digital sphere in which information becomes instantly available. (*New York Times*, 7 April 2010)

WikiLeaks intersects with the *Times* formally in July 2010 when news stories built on the Afghan War Logs were simultaneously published by the *Times*, *Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*, and online by WikiLeaks. In their explanatory coverage on 26 July, WikiLeaks is described as ‘The Source of the Material’, and similar to the description of editorial oversight with ProPublica, the *Times* emphasizes WikiLeaks ‘was not involved in the news organizations’ research, reporting, analysis and writing’. This is not a surprising narrative; *Times* editors and journalists have described the relationship as a news-source relationship (see: Hendler 2010), irrespective of WikiLeaks’ own journalistic identity claims (Eldridge 2017b). Carr reinforces this, writing: ‘nontraditional news sources can alter the news cycle in profound ways’ (*New York Times*, 26 July 2010). In terms of

journalistic agency, the basis for the Afghan reporting describes information only as ‘made available by an organization called WikiLeaks’ (*New York Times*, 26 July 2010).

This reinforces past research showing that, for the *Times*, WikiLeaks was not seen as a partner in collaboration, but rather a source. Closer analysis shows that the discursive treatment of WikiLeaks-proffered information circumvents WikiLeaks as a source, leaning heavily on the original source material and only occasionally referencing WikiLeaks as an avenue for that information’s publicity. Two separate stories of more than 3000 words reference WikiLeaks twice and three times, respectively, and as a source with passive agency. They describe the *Times*’ reporting based on documents ‘made available by WikiLeaks’ (*New York Times*, 26 July 2010). A separate 6,400-word piece refers to the ‘organization’ (and not a ‘news’ or ‘journalism’ organization) three times, its role as a source: ‘released on the Internet by an organization called WikiLeaks’.

In the sample, there are 185 occurrences of the word ‘journalist’ or ‘journalism’. In ten (10) of these, the term is linked to WikiLeaks, and that identity is qualified. Texts emphasize Assange *describing* himself as a journalist or Editor, using phrases such as ‘as he calls himself’, ‘what Assange called’. Where ProPublica’s Steiger is frequently linked to his journalistic credentials, Assange is described as an ‘impresario’ (in a column by Frank Rich) and more commonly as a ‘hacker’ (77 instances).

Overlapping the cases explored here, a Public Editor column by Arthur Brisbane quotes ProPublica’s Steiger praising the *Times* for maintaining ‘arms-length distance’ from

WikiLeaks (31 October 2010). That same piece describes WikiLeaks in a news-source hierarchy, saying:

Another view holds that it is impossible to separate the legitimacy of the material from its source. In this situation, the challenge is compounded because *The Times's* source, WikiLeaks, obtained the material from its own source – a leaker whose identity remains uncertain.

Brisbane says that this poses a reputational risk to its partners, although the *Times* ‘inoculated itself somewhat by reporting independently on the organization’ (*New York Times*, 31 October 2010). WikiLeaks’ agency here is neither journalist nor source; it is instead an information conduit. Elsewhere, WikiLeaks’ role is further subsumed, described as in-service-to the field: ‘WikiLeaks frequently served journalism’ (*New York Times*, 2 August 2010).

The *Times*’ relationship with WikiLeaks is summarized by Carr in a retrospective: ‘In July, WikiLeaks began what amounted to a partnership with mainstream media organizations’ (13 December 2010). He describes this partnership as ‘hybrid journalism’, ‘in the space between so-called hacktivists and mainstream media outlets’. Carr emphasizes distinction, and of Assange he writes: ‘shading his radicalism and collaborating with mainstream outlets, Mr. Assange created a comfort zone for his partners in journalism. They could do their jobs and he could do his’ (*New York Times*, 13 December 2010).

Discussions of ‘hybrid journalism’, with Assange and news media working within separate comfort zones of radicalism and the mainstream, reflect not only traditional boundaries but also the *Times*’ information authority and dominant vision of the field. Assange and WikiLeaks are labelled ‘hacktivists’, transparency activists and advocates, amid other non-journalistic descriptors. As Noam Cohen and Brian Stelter write: ‘The site is not shy about its intent to shape media coverage, and Mr. Assange said he considered himself both a journalist and an advocate; should he be forced to choose one, he would choose advocate’ (*New York Times*, 7 April 2010).

Discussion: Separate treatments of intersecting newswork

Journalistic power is indebted in no small part to a societal expectation that journalists have authority, an authority that traditional journalists amplify in promoting a view of society where they exclusively fulfil certain democratic and informative imperatives. Overly idealised as this supposition can be, when it comes to understanding paradigms guiding news actors’ approaches to newswork it dominates. In the cases analysed here, journalistic authority is maintained when external actors are described as sources – the *Times* as a traditional outlet placed in an authority position – and news paradigms preserved in line with societal expectations (Berkowitz 2000).

Benkler argues in the networked environment established journalists tend to ‘denigrate the journalistic identity of the new kids on the block to preserve their own identity’ (2013: 11). For the nature of the journalistic field, this may be a result of perceived threats posed by new actors challenging the field’s cultural, social and economic capital. As its claims of unique authority are called into question by new actors and its role as a legitimating voice of a dominant vision of society muddled, denigration is

found in language that negates the journalistic identity of new actors. Benkler (2013: 29) goes on to suggest that the eventual networked fourth estate will be defined by ‘interaction and collaboration, however difficult it may be initially’. The analysis here points to difficulty, and findings reflect tension at the boundaries of the journalistic field during moments of interaction and collaboration.

Normalizing interaction

This article introduced a discussion of normalization as a reaction to change, and sought to extend normalization to dynamics of paradigm repair and move from describing the routine adoption of new technologies to describe the routine intersection with non-traditional journalists. This differentiates the fitting of technological affordances under traditional routines from the fitting of newswork developed at intersections of traditional and new journalistic spaces under traditional journalistic paradigms.

In this latter dynamic, we can look to normalization as an extension of paradigm repair insofar as it is the routinized reorientation of newswork by new actors under traditional routines, normalizing the intersections of non-traditional actors with the journalistic field through familiar narratives of newswork. This reinforces a dominant vision of journalism outwardly by presenting to publics a traditional vision of what journalism is, whether via pronounced distinctions with WikiLeaks or in more nuanced descriptions of ProPublica. Just as research into normalization describes routine adoption of new technological forms in ways that negate their alternative approaches (Broersma and Graham 2016), joining this concept with paradigm repair sees the routinization of non-traditional newswork as part and parcel of traditional journalism. This tends to mute alternative narratives that could suggest a more heterogeneous field.

To further contextualize these dynamics, this article posits an appropriation thesis to extend our understanding of paradigmatic repair when spaces of traditional and non-traditional news actors intersect.

An ‘appropriation thesis’

At collaborative moments, I argue that there seem to be three dynamics of interaction: ‘collaboration’, ‘normalization’ and ‘appropriation’. The first two dynamics are apparent in the initial coverage of ProPublica. Signs of collaboration are found in discourses that narrate the intersections between the *Times*’ and ProPublica’s journalists as distinct coworkers, while normalization emerges when publication of ProPublica stories becomes routine and narratives of these intersections are treated as less exceptional. We see this in the syntax of bylines and in descriptions to ProPublica’s journalists and newswork in texts.

Appropriation, as the third dynamic, is introduced here to describe the demonstration of traditional journalistic power and a dominant vision of the journalistic field articulated during these interactive moments. Appropriation describes an exercise of traditional journalistic authority when news texts:

- minimize journalistic agency of non-traditional news actors,
- consolidate new actors’ contributions under the authority of traditional field members and
- describe intersections of non-traditional and traditional journalists as opportunities that traditional journalists can take advantage of.

Appropriation places new actors ‘in service’ to traditional journalism, detailing their role performance in news texts as information sources or platforms, for instance, or as added newswriters contributing towards traditional journalistic endeavour. As a demonstration of authority, appropriation subsumes the work of new actors claiming journalistic identity under dominant hierarchies (e.g. news-source power dynamics). Just as its ‘renegade’ status is used to dismiss claims of a journalistic identity, WikiLeaks’ technical expertise is appropriated as a unique opportunity for traditional journalists to access previously hidden material. While less pronounced, treatment of ProPublica consolidates their newswriting under the *Times*’ authority, treating its newswriting to the *Times*’ typical editorial processes.

When we look to understand appropriation as an extension of paradigm repair, it is as a discursive expression of journalistic authority made publicly (in news texts) that reinforces the primacy of traditional actors. In doing so, news texts mute articulations of new forms of journalism as would-be-signs of a more heterogeneous field. Rather, texts place the work of new actors under traditional, and therefore familiar, news routines that meet ingrained societal expectations of journalism. The conceptual argument here is that while discourses of paradigm repair are varied, discourses of appropriation reflect a unique dimension of repair work at intersections of traditional and non-traditional newswriting.

To expand on this, the intersections explored here involve two non-traditional journalistic organizations who opt to work with traditional journalists, but whose newswriting could reach the public otherwise. Both WikiLeaks and ProPublica have parallel avenues of autonomous publication for the stories and material that they

produced in the *Times*' partnerships, including their own websites and social media output. Irrespective of this potential, we see little reference to their journalistic agency in the *Times*' coverage, even as both claim this identity and perform roles of selection, evaluation and amplification of information (Schultz 2007).

Instead, both cases show contributions made by non-traditional actors subjected to added scrutiny, even as treatment of these interactions differed. For ProPublica, the *Times* remains the primary agent of journalistic authority and verification. References to ProPublica's journalists minimize organizational heft and ProPublica's own journalistic ambitions by frequently linking the value of their newswork to reporters' job history, rather than their reportage while at ProPublica – this despite ProPublica producing Pulitzer-winning reportage and a long list of noteworthy investigations. This comes through frequent references to Steiger and Eisinger's previous work, validating their journalistic identity, and further emphasized when their journalistic enterprise is referred to using lexica familiar to the field.

There are contrasts, however. ProPublica's ability to tie its origins to a dominant vision of the journalistic field seemed to make its newswork more valid. As collaboration with ProPublica becomes 'normalized', texts are less focused on novelty and joint articles lack extended explanations of their genesis or ProPublica as a non-profit. Despite its impact and prominence and extended interaction with the *Times*, WikiLeaks is neither afforded journalistic recognition based on its role performance (i.e. as a watchdog, working in the public interest) nor are qualifiers lessened.

This reflects previous studies that found that news texts amplify certain traditional views of what it is to belong to the journalistic field, reinforced when there is the appearance of a threat posed by new actors. As journalistic distinction builds on in-group/out-group divisions to establish primacy (Eldridge 2014: 4–5), frequent references to ProPublica’s editors and journalists past work legitimate their intersections with the *Times* as that of an ‘in-group’. WikiLeaks, on the other hand, was described primarily using an ‘unfamiliar’ lexica, as outside the boundaries of journalistic practice, often ascribed to either technological (‘hacker’, ‘platform’, ‘website’) or political (‘activist’) associations.

Conclusion

This concept of appropriation as an extension of paradigm repair describes the way in which news texts present a homogeneous picture of journalism, rather than a more heterogeneous field where new and traditional news actors hold authority. From our understanding of the journalistic field, this suggests an act of preservation, securing the boundaries of the field and the field’s dominant vision. Considering the autonomous nature of new actors contributing to journalistic endeavour and their ability to ‘be journalists’ irrespective of mainstream endorsement, this seems to be a difficult position to maintain in the long term. Ryfe argues that such ‘taken-for-granted’ dominance tends to persist until there is a shock to the overall system (2006: 38). Tremours forewarning such a shock are certainly plentiful, and yet we see here persistence of traditional narratives of journalistic authority, and a tendency to define new actors and their activities against familiar metrics of journalism, subsuming new types of journalism under traditional routines.

From the perspective of field theory, this reflects two demands of members of the journalistic field: maintaining internal stability and maintaining outward relevance. In Bourdieu's writing and in subsequent work by Benson, we understand the field as a space defined by its ability to project and maintain a dominant vision of what journalism is. Yet in the face of intersecting dynamics of newswork, as new and non-traditional actors compete for audiences and information, that vision is less easily located and the field's boundaries are less concrete. Extending beyond the cases here, signs of heterogeneity can be found in disruptions of traditional news primacy as new actors who make news and information reach the public in new ways. Benson (2006: 198) asks whether such disruptions could irritate the stasis of the journalistic field, and we can see examples of this in Mark Deuze's descriptions of 'journalisms' (2003) and 'liquid journalism' (Deuze 2008). Elsewhere, I have argued that this is evident in the performance of journalistic roles by irritating, but not insignificant, digital actors labelled 'interlopers' (Eldridge 2017a). In the cases explored in this study we see new forms of journalism produced by actors who might have previously operated as sources, but are now able to both work within partnerships (of a fashion) or produce their own mediated content, publishing autonomously online. However, even if this might reject a homogeneous view of journalism, a heterogeneous view is not immediately apparent as new actors confront the power held by traditional journalists. Traditional members of the field enjoy a greater 'specific weight' to counteract disruptions due to their societal and economic prominence (Bourdieu 2005: 43). While journalistic practices have become more accessible and information less exclusive, from the findings thus far, we cannot assume that this has rendered that specific weight completely innocuous.

While initial in its scoping, the framework developed here to conceptualize moments of interaction should allow future research to explore these dynamics in comparative and case study research to further understanding. As a result, new ways of exploring the intersection of traditional and non-traditional newswork at moments of disruption can be built. Developing appropriation as an extension of paradigm repair offers an initial step towards that understanding. Where critiques of normalization note the short-selling of new alternative voices on new media forms, so too must we critique the subsuming of autonomous newswork under paradigms that neglect the potential of a more heterogeneous field. While appropriation may be expected, with the journalistic field defined in part by competition to ‘appropriate what is thought to secure readership’ (Bourdieu 2005: 44), it is all the same a problematic treatment of new actors intersecting with the boundaries of the journalistic field.

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Contributor details

Scott Eldridge is an assistant professor at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at University of Groningen where he studies changing conceptions of journalistic identity and the journalistic field. He is the author of *Online Journalism from the Periphery: Interloper Media and the Journalistic Field* (2018, Routledge) and co-editor with Bob Franklin of *The Routledge Handbook of Developments in Digital Journalism Studies* (2019) and *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies* (2017). He is also an associate editor and reviews editor for the journal *Digital Journalism*.

Contact:

Oude Kijk in ‘t Jatstraat 26, 9712 EK Groningen, the Netherlands.

E-mail: s.a.eldridge.ii@rug.nl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2184-1509>

Notes

¹ This is made explicit in WikiLeaks' *raison d'être*:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121206211424/http://www.wikileaks.org/About>.

² See Margaret Sullivan writing on this for the **New York Times**' Public Editor blog:

<http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/29/whos-a-journalist-a-question-with-many-facets-and-one-sure-answer/>.

³ WikiLeaks.org/About.html updated in December 2015 to a more streamlined page.

This research uses its previous 'About' page, archived at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121206211424/http://www.wikileaks.org/About>.

⁴ Lists of each organization's partners can be found here:

<https://www.propublica.org/about/partners/> and here: <https://wikileaks.org/-Partners-.html>.